OLIVE PLAATJE

By SARAH TALBERT KEELAN

It is a far throw from New York to South Africa. A sad bereavement suffered by a well-known native family in that far off country has reduced the circulation of THE BROWNIES' Book by one interested little subscriber, from Kimberley, South Africa— the diamond city of the world.

Olive Schreiner Plaatje, more intimately known as "Ngoetsi,"' died on the fourteenth of July, in Bloemfontein, South Africa, at the age of sixteen.

Ngoetsi did her life work at the age of thirteen, during the Fall of 1918—which, by the way, is the South African Spring—when the influenza epidemic swept over Kimberley, and killed in one month, 6,000 people, out of a population of about 30,000. October, 1918, has since been known as the "Black October." All the shops, churches, schools, theatres and marketplaces were closed up and deserted. Drug stores alone were packed with customers, day and night. Nearly all the doctors were ill in bed, and pharmacists had to depend upon one general prescription for all sufferers. Throughout October, when the epidemic raged, the city looked like a huge hospital, for, according to official reports, all but five percent of the entire population of the city of Kimberley had the disease.

Only two Kimberley streets, I learned, were alive with traffic—the road from the City Hall to the hospital, and from the hospital to the cemetery.

The Plaatje household was among those stricken with the "flu" with the exception of Ngoetsi and her father, Mr. Solomon Plaatje, the Brotherhood lecturer, who is well known to many of us Americans. He himself at the time was looking after many of the other sufferers, often leaving his sick family alone with Olive, who, single-handed, was kept busy nursing a household of helpless patients, from her mother and cousins down—to be accurate, eight in all.

Nearly every house in the neighborhood had its funerals, but little Olive, like Mrs. Van Rooven, over the road, saved every one of her patients.

Three months after the epidemic had passed away, when shops, schools, diamond mines and everything had reopened, and the people were glad it was all over, Olive was seized with an attack of rheumatic fever, which the doctors said was the after-effect of her nursing. She had to give up school and her piano lessons, and on the doctor's advice, her parents sent her to the Hot Springs of Aliwal, North Cape.

Upon her arrival there, Olive was not allowed to use the waters, because her skin was not white. However, she eventually got better and resumed her studies at the Wesleyan Methodist High School for colored girls in Natal.

The Brownies' Book, v. 2, no. 12, December 1921, pp. 342-343

It was there that the rheumatic affection went through little Olive's heart and leakage developed. The teachers sent her home, but she got no further than Bloemfontein, where she died, about one

hundred miles from home. Her mother hastened to her side; but her father, being in far off in America, did not hear of the end until six weeks afterwards.

It is painful to learn that Ngoetsi most probably would have reached her mother's house but for the shocking "Jim Crow" system, which in British South Africa is even more rigorous than in the United States. It is charged that the sickness was aggravated by the harsh treatment accorded her by the white train men of the South African railways. At a railroad junction, where she waited hours for the Kimberlev connection, her escort was not allowed to rest the sick girl in the waiting room or on the platform seats, which are at the disposal of white passengers only. The patient had to wait outside of the depot, without shelter or comfort of any kind.

It will thus be seen that while Brownies are a "problem" everywhere, in their own homeland—Africa—their troubles start rather early in life.

While we are enjoying the benefits of instruction in high, schools, conservatories and colleges in New York, Massachusetts, etc., we should remember that in South Africa there are no public schools for colored children. The natives can only get elementary training in the rural and village mission schools. Native children who take advantage of these have to pay their "tickeys" and ‘‘tanners" (English nickels and dimes), every week in the primary section, while the fourth and fifth grade pupils pay a quarter or more every Monday morning. In addition to these weekly school fees, the African Brownies have to buy their own books, pencils and slates, which in the South African public schools are supplied to white children free of cost. Therefore, we should appreciate the sacrifices made by Mrs. Plaatje and other African mothers to supply their children with training and strive to make the best use of our superior privileges. Yet with all these difficulties, our late little Brownie friend had advantages which few of us on this side of the Atlantic will ever be privileged to have. Coming probably from the most polyglot family, of a polyglot country, Olive could write and converse in Sechuana, her father's language, as well as Sixosa, her mother tongue. Her parents, being of two different tribes, have separate languages. Besides. these, Ngoetso could read and write English and Dutch. Her uncle is chief translater in native languages for the Union Government. One of her cousins is interpreter to the South African Native Affairs Commission; another was until lately examiner for the Cape Education (Graduating) Department. To hold any of these posts, one has to be proficient in at least six different languages, and have a working' knowledge of a few more dialects. One girl cousin is in training as a nurse at the Scottish Missionary Hospital, of Lovedale—the Hampton of South Africa.

The late Brownie was named after Olive Schreiner, a great South African authoress; "Ngoetsi" is after a native chieftainess in Africa.

I first met Olive's father at London, England, during October of last year. This summer I went to spend my vacation with my friend, Mr. and Mrs. Burton, of Ridgefield Park, N. J. Knowing that Knowing that Mr. Plaatje was in New York, we invited him to spend a day with us, and on calling him over the telephone, to make the engagement, I learned of his sad bereavement, and of how Mrs. Plaatje faced the sorrow oy laying to rest the dear little girl who, three years before, had saved her own mother from the "flu."

I feel certain that readers of THE BROWNIES' Book will sympathise with Mr. and Mrs. Plaatje, and especially with Violet ''Teto"' Plaatje, the surviving subscriber to THE BROWNIES' Book, for by the death of Olive, a promising young career has been brought to an end; family hopes have been dashed to pieces, and the Kimberley Women's Sisterhood has been deprived of one oi their most useful junior members. Peace be to her ashes!

The Brownies' Book, v. 2, no. 12, December 1921, pp. 342-343